

**New standards aid in virtual instruction
SREB issues cost, teaching guidelines for online learning programs**

By Justin Appel, Assistant Editor, eSchool News
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The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has issued two new guidance documents for helping policy makers and education leaders as they establish online learning programs.

"Standards for Quality Online Teaching," a follow-up to the group's 2003 report, "Essential Principles of High-Quality Online Teaching," offers a checklist of sorts on what makes a great online teacher. And "Cost Guidelines for State Virtual Schools" gives various scenarios for starting a virtual school from the ground up.

The first of these reports contains a number of standards that SREB member states, or anyone else with an online learning program, can use to define and implement high-quality online teaching. Within these standards, SREB has defined the qualities that demonstrate they are being met.

According to the document, a high-quality online teacher should meet the teaching standards for his or her state; have appropriate academic credentials and the prerequisite technology skills to teach online; demonstrate the ability to incorporate strategies that encourage active learning and interaction; provide leadership in a manner that promotes regular student success; have experienced online learning from the perspective of the student; and understand and be responsive to students with special needs.

With these standards in place, SREB hopes more students will have the opportunity to take high-quality courses online--"[regardless] of where they live," said Bill Thomas, the group's director of educational technology.

Successfully teaching a course online requires special skills and considerations, Thomas said: "There are aspects of online teaching that are dramatically different than conventional classrooms. You could be a great physics teacher, but a horrible online physics teacher, if you aren't able to manage your time or your students very well."

In a conventional classroom, teachers are able to see the faces and reactions of students to what they are teaching. But in an online setting, the only feedback or cues teachers will receive are eMail or text messages. This can pose a significant challenge for teachers, because not all students are able to express themselves equally well through writing.

SREB's guidance document aims to correct this by recommending that a high-quality online teacher should be able to provide an online syllabus detailing the terms of the class interaction for both teacher and students. Teachers also are expected to provide timely, constructive feedback to students about assignments and questions. In addition, they are expected to have a period of time set apart for students to be able to call them with any questions the students might have regarding the class.

Despite the need for special skills when teaching in an online setting, Thomas and others note that high-quality online teaching starts with high-quality teachers in general. If a teacher isn't effective in a traditional classroom, he or she won't be effective online, either.

"Providing high-quality teachers to all students, whether online or not, should be our mission," said Susan Patrick, director of the North American Council for Online Learning (NACOL). "Students in low-income areas and rural areas should have equal access to high-quality teaching and courses, and we are expanding options for all students and leveling the playing field with virtual schools." She said SREB's report is "a valuable document for any institution looking at high school reform and moving to more rigorous teaching and learning."

Many of those in the online learning community believe that having an experienced and highly qualified teacher is more important than having someone who is inexperienced in the classroom but who is proficient in technology.

"We don't always look for teachers who have all the technical skills that are described as a necessary component of high-quality online teaching, because we feel that if we find great teachers, we can teach them the technological skills," said Julie Young, president and chief executive officer of the Florida Virtual School. "Everything that's listed as a standard in terms of technology is absolutely a necessary standard for a high-quality online program, but we want to find somebody who has the capacity and willingness to learn the technology."

The number of online classrooms and virtual schools has increased significantly in the past few years. There are now more than 500,000 K-12 students taking online classes in each of the 50 states, according to the Peak Group.

SREB is a 16-member state organization founded in 1948 with the intention of helping government and education leaders work together to advance education and improve the social and economic life in the South.

SREB's online teaching guide isn't the only such document to assemble standards for high-quality online instruction. In November, the National Education Association (NEA) plans to release a similar guide of its own. NEA's guide, compiled in conjunction with NACOL and the International Society for Technology in Education, will be unveiled at NACOL's Virtual School Symposium in Plano, Texas, in November, Patrick said.

With additional reporting by Managing Editor Dennis Pierce.

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